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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002378

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: NATIONAL AGENDA COMMITTEE MOVES FORWARD

REF: A. AMMAN 2043

[1](#)B. AMMAN 1309

Classified By: Charge Christopher Henzel for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The royal committee charged with drafting a "national agenda" is reportedly on track to complete a final report in September. Committee members have divided their work into 11 separate subjects and established outside working groups that include experts and non-government representatives. Discussion on electoral reform and women's rights will, however, remain within the committee. Contentious debate has erupted at times between traditionalists, who argue for limited change, and those who advocate a real overhaul of the status quo. The recommendations in the September report will be used to draft "action plans" for each government ministry, along with implementing legislation, with progress on concrete benchmarks and timetables monitored by the Government Performance Unit under Deputy PM Marwan Muasher. Sustained support from the palace and ensuing governments will be needed if the national agenda project is to have lasting impact. End Summary.

OFF THE GROUND

[1](#)2. (C) Poloffs met March 20 with Ashraf Zeitoon, personal staffer to Deputy PM and Minister for Government Performance Marwan Muasher. Zeitoon explained that after a relatively slow start (ref B), the 26-member Steering Committee named by the palace in February (and overseen by Muasher) to establish a "national agenda" was now fully active. Meeting once a week, normally on Saturday, the committee had divided its work into 11 separate subject groupings (e.g., investment, education, employment, etc.) and formed eight different working groups, each comprised of more than 20 experts and private citizens, to examine these subjects. Based on the findings of the working groups and conclusions of committee members, the committee will prepare a comprehensive report in September that will include specific goals in each subject area along with concrete measures needed to achieve them. Zeitoon said the report would also include recommendations for the drafting of needed implementing legislation.

[1](#)3. (C) To ensure that the final committee report will not collect dust, Zeitoon said it will be used as the basis for drafting detailed "action plans" for each government ministry that will incorporate specific benchmarks and timetables. The Government Performance Unit (GPU) - a branch of Muasher's new Ministry for Government Performance -- will closely track progress on each plan and hold ministers accountable. Meanwhile, another branch of the ministry, the Government Communications Unit, will help publicize and "market" the national agenda to the Jordanian public, which he characterized as being in a foul mood over perceived stagnant or declining living standards. Zeitoon explained that the committee report will also heavily influence future government budgets. For example, if the report emphasizes the need for more government investment in education, funds allocated for education would increase accordingly. Zeitoon cautioned, however, not to expect immediate results. The national agenda will be a long-term planning document guiding Jordan's development over the next ten years, while action plans will likely take at least several months to draft and finalize during 2006.

CANDID CONVERSATIONS

[1](#)4. (C) According to Zeitoon, discussion among Steering Committee members has been candid and, at times, contentious. Outspoken advocates for reform during past meetings include former Minister of Planning Bassem Awadallah, UNDP Assistant Secretary-General Rima Khalaf, Director of the Center for

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Strategic Studies Mustafa Hamarneh, and Islamic Centrist Party member and women's activist Nawal Faouri. Zeitoon contrasted these voices with some traditionalist members who "just don't get it" and who resist broad reforms on the

grounds that Jordan has "already changed enough." (NOTE: Zeitoon did not mention the names of such traditionalists, but did say they included members appointed from Parliament. END NOTE.) He also said that Abd al-Latif Arabiyat of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) had played a surprisingly constructive role to date. Zeitoon was confident that the strong pro-reform advocates would prevail and produce a final report recommending real, not incremental, change.

15. (C) When asked about political reform, specifically a proposed new elections law and legislation on women's rights, Zeitoon responded that these topics had not been delegated to a working group for study. Rather, the members of the Steering Committee had chosen to examine these more controversial items themselves. While the September report would include recommendations for what should be included in political reform legislation, the actual drafting of the laws would be left to the government. Consequently, a new elections law might not be ready for debate in parliament until 2006.

THE INDOMITABLE DR. MUASHER

16. (C) Zeitoon praised the work of Deputy PM Muasher in overseeing the work of the Steering Committee and his ideas for achieving reform. While Muasher does not officially "chair" the committee, he is reportedly active in keeping its work focused and reminding members of the King's expectations for their work. Muasher's role in the royal decentralization committee, in contrast, was more that of an observer whose main task was to ensure that the two committees were not pursuing divergent agendas. Zeitoon said that King Abdullah had asked Muasher to fly to Washington, D.C. last week after PM al-Fayez became ill to help present and explain Jordan's reform agenda, both on Capitol Hill and in meetings with NGOs and businesses. (NOTE: Zeitoon hinted that Muasher could be moving on from the GOJ by the end of the year, while he himself will be assuming a new position next month in the royal court. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

17. (C) The national agenda process is still in its early stages and the bulk of the committee's work remains to be done. Committee member and women's activist Nadia Bushnaq told poloff March 21 that she was cautiously optimistic about the progress made so far, but was unsure of the final outcome -- noting that the key is implementing changes, not just coming up with recommendations. Zeitoon acknowledged public skepticism about "yet another commission," but insists this project will be different. The ultimate success of the national agenda will depend on a strong and sustained commitment by the palace, and by ensuing governments, during the coming years to carry out recommended reforms and to match identified priorities with commensurate funds.
HENZEL